

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges and realities faced by front-line staff are immense, and as a result, the stressors faced by our system's leaders are daunting. **Many have compared the experiences of front-line health care staff to the experience of war, and as such, your leadership through this battle is incredibly important.** You are leading staff who are putting their lives at risk in fighting this pandemic. This disaster is unique in that it is unfolding in our own lives while we are also trying to care for others. Below are 7 Tough Facts, **adapted from the Battlemind concepts**, to assist you, as a leader, in **developing the resilience of your staff** and bolstering their strength to fight this pandemic.

**THIS IS DIFFICULT.****STAFF DON'T CARE WHAT YOU KNOW, UNTIL THEY KNOW YOU CARE.**

**We know this:** The number of those falling ill and/or dying from COVID-19, across the globe, is staggering. Front-line health care workers are **sacrificing their own health** and, in some cases, their lives in this fight.

**Leaders can:** Ensure that your staff are not taking unnecessary risks, conduct regular **check-ins with your team**, and **acknowledge with respect** that you care equally about those who are working and those who are out sick.

**THIS ENVIRONMENT IS DEMANDING.****RECOGNIZE THAT YOUR STAFF HAVE LIMITS.**

**We know this:** The pace and environment will **take a physical and mental toll** on front-line staff.

**Leaders can:** Encourage your staff to get **adequate sleep**, **stay hydrated**, and **utilize wellness resources** available/provided. **Model self-care behaviors** and **incorporate wellness activities** into your check-ins/staff meetings (healthy snacks, short meditations/breathing exercises, encouraging staff to take walking breaks, etc.). **Recognize that your staff have their limits** and insist that self-care is maintained during this time.

**FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY ARE NOT SIGNS OF WEAKNESS.****EVERYONE EXPERIENCES FEAR.**

**We know this:** **Stress response reactions** to disasters may include anxiety, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, anger, irritability, and avoidance of painful feelings and experiences.

**Leaders can:** Communicate to your staff that you have **trust** and **confidence in their ability to succeed** - they have successfully **managed difficult situations before**. Try to provide your staff with sufficient **time to reset** and encourage them to **talk about their fears with trusted colleagues** - this is key. Provide **additional trainings**.

**IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO ADMIT NEEDING MORE SUPPORT.****THIS WILL IMPACT EVERYONE ON YOUR TEAM.**

**We know this:** **Trauma-related responses** are common after large-scale disasters. Sometimes, this can lead to unhealthy coping strategies (avoidance strategies like increased substance use, poor dietary habits, aggression).

**Leaders can:** Establish a climate where you can **acknowledge that your staff are under stress** and encourage your staff to **seek additional support**, if needed. **Circulate mental health resources**. EAP services are available to you and your household members, 24/7: 800-222-0364. Website: [www.foh4you.com](http://www.foh4you.com)

## FRONT-LINE RESPONSE PLACES A TREMENDOUS STRAIN ON FAMILIES.



**We know this:** Stress and anxiety related to fighting on the front lines, plus challenges faced at home (ill/ vulnerable family members, school closures, unemployment, etc.), places **tremendous strain on families.**

**Leaders can:** **Acknowledge that your staff are operating in abnormal circumstances.** Encourage your staff to attend to family needs. Find a way to **recognize special occasions/milestones** of your staff and their families, which are being disrupted (graduations, weddings, birthdays, etc.). Families are **grieving losses** of all kinds.

## TEAM COHESION AND STABILITY MAY BE DISRUPTED. STAFF FUNCTION BEST WITH THOSE THEY KNOW.



**We know this:** Staff cohesion **will be disrupted** by illness, competing home/work demands, emergency leave, changes in job functions to support gaps, etc. **Breakdowns in communication are common** during a crisis.

**Leaders can:** **Maintain the integrity of your team** to the best of your ability. **Try to rotate/shift pairs or small groups** of your staff, rather than moving individual staff members. Immediately **welcome new team members**. Help **reintegrate returning staff** who have been out/quarantined and address any concerns or anxieties they have. **Keep your staff informed**, ensure that **policies and procedures are clear**, and share news of successes.

## GOOD LEADERSHIP IS IMPERATIVE. STAFF NEED TO COME HOME WITH A STORY THEY CAN LIVE WITH.



**We know this:** **Good leadership is linked to higher morale**, better performance, and better cohesion. When facing crises, **staff often perceive failures in their leadership** – failures to think and act clearly under stress. Additionally, this **pandemic may pose moral and ethical challenges related to patient care.**

**Leaders can:** Encourage staff to ask questions and **limit your own defensiveness**. **Recognize your staff** for their sacrifices, **offer praise**, and **discuss the moral implications of difficult decisions** they may have to make.

*Battlefield concepts adapted from "10 Tough Facts About Combat and What Leaders Can Do to Mitigate Risk and Build Resilience." Walter Reed Army Institute, Land Combat Team; this handout has been adapted from the COVID-19 Employee Support Team Resources Guide, April 2020, VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System.*